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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 YEREVAN 000607

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SUBJECT: ARMENIAN ELECTION SCENESETTER

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Classified By: CDA A.F. Godfrey, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

Summary

¶1. (C) The stage is set for this election to go far better than other recent polls in Armenia, but we have not, by a long shot, seen a fundamental change in political culture here, and things could still go very wrong on Election Day. We are cautiously optimistic that Armenia's parliamentary election this weekend will be judged as a step forward toward international standards. The campaign period was very active, and while pro-government candidates had significant advantages, opposition candidates had good access to media and were able to meet with voters and conduct public rallies. Competition between pro-government parties will make it more difficult for authorities to engage in systematic vote-stealing, even if they were minded to do so. That same competition, however, may have been at the root of a variety of violent incidents in recent weeks.

The government is well aware of strained relations within OSCE and is exploiting this tension. The ODIHR Mission Chief told us he was already seeking the "lowest common denominator" for a post-election press statement.

Polling trends suggest that the ruling Republican Party and the new pro-government "Prosperous Armenia" party will be the top vote getters. At least three other parties are expected to pass the five percent vote threshold, but many of the opposition parties -- which against all logic did not form a pre-election coalition -- will not. These opposition parties are certain to declare that the elections were rigged and will call for protests beginning as soon as Sunday, May 13. While we have pressed for government restraint, should protests take place, President Kocharian has already declared that the police are ready and able to respond to maintain public order. End Summary.

FINAL COUNTDOWN TO THE BIG DAY

¶2. (C) THE STAKES: Armenia's May 12 election will directly elect parliamentary deputies to fill the 41 single-mandate

(majoritarian) parliament seats and 90 party list (proportional representation) seats, in Armenia's unicameral legislature. Control of the parliament will then determine whom the president can nominate as prime minister (by June 9) and cabinet ministers (by June 29). Armenia has been sharply criticized by international observers for just about every previous election it has held since post-Soviet independence. The government generally, and the president in particular, have clearly made it a crusade to get a passing grade this time.

13. (C) A great deal of positive work has been done to get the technical preparations in order. The GOAM has centralized and significantly cleaned-up its previously chaotic voter lists. The revised Election Code corrected a number of concerns, notably to make explicit provision for robust access rights (with proper accreditation) in all polling stations for party proxies, international observers, domestic observers, and journalists. An unresolved concern about the voters registry is that perhaps approaching half a million people whose names appear in the voters registry are emigrants living abroad, most of whom probably will not return to Armenia on election day. The worry is that pro-governmental forces may have learned about who these people are, and find a way to cast fraudulent ballots in their names. The OSCE EOM is alert to this potential problem, and should be watching for any signs of it -- though we are concerned that they have apparently not trained STOs how to spot such fraud.

14. (C) BREAD AND CIRCUSES, HEAVY ON THE CIRCUS: The final weeks of the campaign have seen the major parties, pro-governmental and opposition alike, take to the streets with peaceful political rallies, often combined with free concerts. The Republicans have caravanned up and down the streets of Yerevan with three shiny, new light-up signboard

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trucks and a bandstand on wheels, all decked out with professional graphics. The most significant rallies -- by the Republicans, Prosperous Armenia, and the stridently-opposition Impeachment Bloc -- probably each drew somewhere in the range of 7,000-10,000 participants to their largest events these last ten days.

15. (C) PROTEST OVER OPPOSITION JAILING: On May 9, the Impeachment Bloc/Republic Party/New Times party alliance marched to the National Security Service headquarters to protest the detention of former foreign minister Alexander Arzumanyan, (septel). The protesters and police fell into a brief skirmish, but restraint prevailed on both sides, as senior police officials and opposition leaders worked together to de-escalate the situation. Both sides have since issued more critical press releases against the actions of the other, but on the scene they cooperated.

16. (C) VIOLENCE MARS CAMPAIGN: The most dismaying part of the campaign period to date has been the string of violent incidents over recent weeks. Many of the victims of these incidents have decidedly shady connections and reputations, which might lead one to think (and as the government has in fact argued) that they were not political but personal acts of violence between criminal factions. However, the sheer number of these incidents strongly suggest that the heightened intensity of the campaign period is a contributing motive, and several of the incidents have clear political connections. We think it unlikely, however, that any of these incidents were centrally directed by anyone at senior levels of any of the political movements. Probably most of these incidents represent hardball local disputes, where the conflicts and rivalries are much more personal, and very often represent significant economic interests (licit or otherwise) in addition to the political ones. This rash of violent incidents may represent a perverse indicator that the pro-governmental forces' rivalry is genuine. As it has become unclear which circles within the ruling elites will be

ascendant come election day, the more thuggish types down in the ranks may be scrapping to stake out turf.

17. (C) WIN, PLACE, OR SHOW: The top two vote-getters, almost certainly, will be the ruling Republican Party and rival, pro-governmental Prosperous Armenia. We expect each of these will get between 17 and 25 percent of the votes. Following the two front-runners most likely will be the ARF-Dashnaktsutyun and Orinats Yerkir (Rule of Law) parties, with some constellation of lesser parties eking their way over the threshold. Among these, Heritage Party, National Unity, the Impeachment Bloc, and either of the two Peoples' Parties, might have the greatest likelihood of winning some seats.

18. (C) KOCHARIAN'S PARTING THOUGHTS: President Kocharian held a televised interview with three trusted journalists, that aired on almost all television channels the evening of May 10. The president urged voters to think seriously about the issues facing Armenia and vote for those who can best solved these problems. Without saying their names, the president transparently favored the Republican Party, Prosperous Armenia, and ARF-Dashnakstutyun in his address. He said that no parliament could function properly without opposition parties present, but declined to name any opposition parties in particular which he thought worthy of election. He reminded voters, in another unsubtle plug for Serzh Sargsian, that the country remained in a potentially vulnerable security situation, and said the people should elect officials with relevant military experience and credentials.

GOVERNMENT TOUCHY OVER HIGH STAKES

19. (C) KEEP YOUR SOCKS UP!: The government is acutely aware that our Millennium Challenge Account program, the EU's (less significant) European Neighborhood Policy, and international respectability are all at stake during this election. The stakes are heightened by the universal sense, in Armenia, that these elections set the stage for next year's presidential transition. Government officials have responded by, on the one hand, working hard on many fronts to get as prepared as they possibly can to hold a clean poll. The word

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has clearly gone out far and wide to local officials and election commissioners that the President will be highly displeased if these elections are given a bad grade.

110. (C) KEEPING THE MONITORS ON SIDE: At the same time, government officials have made quite clear to the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission (EOM) and to OSCE member-state embassies that Armenian leaders will closely scrutinize every word of every report, and is prepared to challenge any finding with which it disagrees. President Kocharian and FM Oskanian have each admonished EOM leaders that the OSCE reports should include nothing beyond what EOM observers have themselves personally seen, and nothing that they have heard about from anyone else. Oskanian repeated this message in his May 8 meeting with chiefs of mission from the U.S. and EU member states. The main purpose of that meeting, in fact, was to engage in a point by point defense and rebuttal of anything that could be construed as a criticism in ODIHR's third interim report on the election process, issued by the OSCE May 4. Oskanian was, unusually, joined in this meeting by presidential staffer Vigen Sargsian, who provided most of the detailed critique. In the latest potentially worrisome wrinkle, the Central Election Commission has announced that it will supply its own interpreters to "help" international observers in the polling stations. The OSCE EOM has protested to the government that it will not accept anything that could be construed as "minders." We have communicated a similar message to GOAM contacts.

GOVERNMENT EXPLOITS OSCE CONFLICT

¶11. (C) We are concerned about whether the OSCE Election Observation Mission's leadership is really girded to deliver a sharp critique of the Armenian election, should that be warranted. Aside from the Government of Armenia's intense scrutiny and defensiveness over the OSCE's report, it is clear that EOM leaders also feel threatened by the internecine OSCE institutional battles (see, for example, Ref B), and the imperatives toward consensus with the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and other stakeholders. CDA met on May 11 with ODIHR EOM Ambassador Frlec, who said he was already "trying to find the lowest common denominator" with other observer groups. He lamented that the Government was exploiting the conflict; the Chairman of the Central Election Commission distributed to OSCE Parliamentary Assembly observers a pamphlet with a sharp critique of the ODIHR EOM's third interim report.

¶12. (C) Some long-term observers with whom we met around Armenia were reticent to compare notes with us, and seemed to have a very narrow view of their mandate. Our five Embassy-provided short-term observers (STOs) preparing for deployment under the OSCE aegis each felt that briefings from the central EOM leadership and from their respective long-term observer (LTO) team leaders seemed intended to keep STOs on a tight leash. They said EOM briefers bent way over backwards to emphasize the need not to report anything beyond what the STOs themselves saw directly; never relaying, for example, things the STOs might be told by domestic observers, party proxies, or average voters about what might be going on. Most surprisingly, the EOM provided no/no training to STOs on the most common fraud warning signs. It also seemed that EOM leaders found it an unaccustomed challenge dealing with such a large contingent of Russian-seconded STOs. A final challenge: we understand that slightly more than half of the LTOs participating in this mission are first-timers, leaving this EOM light on experience.

GODFREY